

THE COOLVILLE AND BEEBE ROCKS STONE PILLARS

ATHENS COUNTY, OHIO

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Natural stone pillars have the potential for at least three types of prehistoric significance – as sites of prehistoric rock art, as the locus for less transitory prehistoric activity, loosely defined as camps, and use as geographic landmarks or “trail markers.” Theoretically, a site might represent all three types of activity but no definite examples of prehistoric rock art have been found associated with a stone pillar in Ohio. Association with camp sites or similar manifestations relies upon subjective interpretation of the proximity of such sites and artifact material to the natural feature but can often be considered as unlikely due to the lack of level ground adjacent to these ridgetop features. Even more subjective are inferences that a particular stone pillar was utilized as a landmark or “trail guide” in prehistoric times, given the degree to which forest cover obscures even the most prominent of these features (as well as burial or “signal” mounds), particularly in southeastern Ohio (cf. Waldron and Abrams 1999).

No such site examined so far (under admittedly highly variable survey conditions) has revealed any artifact material in direct association, with the possible exception of the Chili stone pillars (Murphy 2010) none has been associated with prehistoric petroglyphs or other deliberate alteration of the bedrock by man (e.g., cupstones), other than the Coolville stone pillar described in this article; and the use of these natural geologic features as prehistoric landmarks remains high inferential and very subjective or speculative, given how little we actually know regarding prehistoric trails, although that possibility should have a special appeal to many academic and CRM archaeologists who incline particularly to the hypothetical. Nonetheless, all such standing rock sites should be considered for potential archaeological activity and significance whenever they are encountered.

Athens County Rock Pillars

Snyder (2009) describes and illustrates the best known of the three most conspicuous rock pillars developed in the Pennsylvanian coal strata of Athens County — the one near the village of Mineral, also illustrated in Peters (1947) and Murphy (2004: 21). (Snyder also refers to the Shadow Rock near Beebe in Rome Township.) At the Mineral “Devil’s Tea Table” Pillar, survey of substantial eroded ground surface indicated no archaeological material associated with the pillar; nor is the feature visible from adjacent Hewett Fork, although it occupies a conspicuous position overlooking a wide

abandoned stream meander. Granted that visibility or the lack of it is not everything, the pillar could easily be found if prehistoric trekkers were looking for it, so it may have served as a marker for any trail along Hewett Fork, if such a trail existed. Peters (1947) provides a striking, distant view of the Shadow or Beebe Rocks, which would support interpretation of them as trail markers, had this ridgetop consisted of pasture or plowed field in prehistoric times and if there were a known trail along the Hocking. A third Athens County pillar just north of Coolville is also described by Peters and is just barely visible today from U. S. Route 33 as it crosses the Hocking River but that says little about its visibility in prehistoric times. Much of Athens County is rugged enough that other rock pillars may exist but these are the best known.

The Coolville Pillar

When the trees are bare, this small pillar is visible from U.S. Route 33 as it crosses the Hocking River just north of Coolville, Athens Co., Ohio. It stands at the end of a prominent cliff of Waynesburg sandstone, lying north of Ohio Route 144 and at the mouth of a small hollow. As a prehistoric landmark it could have been used to locate this hollow or a slightly larger one just west of the existing church camp on the southeast site of Route 33. The next hollow downstream, now traversed in part by the old highway from Coolville to Torch, is considerably larger and according to the late Ernest R. Sutton housed a very large rock shelter. The shelter, unfortunately, was buried by widening of U.S. Route 33 before ODOT became engaged in archaeological survey.

The Coolville Rock Pillar (Figures 1, 2) is very small, probably less than ten feet in height if one does not include the rock base, which is still part of the adjoining cliff. No carvings of any sort were noticed on the heavily crossbedded sandstone. The surprising feature that may be associated with it was found in examining the top of the adjacent rock ledge, which in places forms a wall 30-40 feet high. Although there is little or no room for adequate shelter along its base, inspection of the top of the cliff revealed a series of six or more artificial pits in the rock (Fig. 3). These have every appearance of being prehistoric, although they are in a very unusual location, very near the edge of the cliff. Oak and hickory and no doubt in prehistoric times chestnut must have grown here, so perhaps the location appealed to an exceptionally tidy group of prehistoric

nutcrackers who preferred to toss their hulls and shells over the adjacent precipice. Seriously, however, these do represent the first prehistoric feature that might be associated with an Ohio rock pillar, although the question of association and adjacency remains open, since they do lie a good twenty feet or more from the actual pillar.

Beebe or Shadow Rocks

These “twin” pillars lie on the top of a conspicuous hill of circumalluviation about one-half mile southeast of Beebe Bridge and about one-half mile north of the Rowell family cemetery, overlooking the Hocking River Valley in easternmost (NW 1/4 Section 3) Rome Township. As mentioned above, early in the last century the pillars were surrounded by pasture and were highly visible from the Hocking River Valley to the north. Today they are thickly overgrown in secondary forest, obscured by pawpaw and larger trees, so that the Hocking Valley can barely be seen through the foliage. Figure 4 is a close view ca. 1905 (Bush 1905) and the gentleman standing in front of the larger rock gives a good idea of the scale. At this time the “Shadow Rocks” were described as an “interesting freak of nature” that could be seen from the B. & O. SW railroad. Figures 5 and 6 show the two pillars as they appeared last summer. These views show the sides opposite those shown in Figure 4 and despite the obscuring foliage it is clear that they have not been altered much by erosion during the past century.

The pillars are estimated as being about 30 feet high and only the lower portions could be closely examined. These are irregularly eroded sandstone revealing no petroglyphs or carved graffiti. Except for the areas around the immediate base of the pillars, ground cover was too heavy to allow adequate surface survey and no test excavations were conducted. The exposed ground revealed no evidence of flint chips, charcoal, or other archaeological remains.

The striking difference in the visibility of Beebe Rocks on the 1905 landscape and on today’s horizon raises the question of whether these and other rock pillars were used as landmarks or “trail markers” in prehistoric times, for they certainly are not very visible today. In promoting the idea that Early Woodland burial mounds in the Hocking Valley region were territorial markers and were deliberately made “intervisible,” perhaps even as part of a “corridor of visibility” extending many miles and “constituting some form of communication utilizing the

mounds,” Waldron and Abrams (1999: 106) assert that intervisibility “did not require the clearing of huge tracts of forest.” It would seem that rather than a cleared vista analogous to modern power-line swathes cutting across the landscape, these authors would envision something more like a series of prehistoric cell towers. Let me just say I have hiked along many a ridge and stood atop many an Adena mound in the Hocking Valley and with few exceptions would not want to have to provide the intensive labor necessary to render the next nearest mound visible and to maintain that visibility. Notwithstanding the usefulness of GIS as an important analytic tool, it cannot replace common sense and, in this case, the necessity of making a subjective judgment about what constitutes “huge tracts of forest.”

When it comes to considering rock pillars such as Beebe Rocks, which are potentially much more visible than most Early Woodland mounds, such an argument that a modest amount of felling trees would render the geologic features highly conspicuous and useful elements in the prehistoric cognitive map—seems even more lame. Other than Lord Dunmore’s historic trek up the Hocking Valley in 1774, there is no known reference to a trail of any sort

along the Hocking bottoms or the adjacent ridges, but suppose there were: clearing a small area around the Beebe Rocks would scarcely contribute much to making them visible from the forested flood plain, and developing an additional vista along the level flood plain sufficient to make the rocks visible from such a trail would indeed require a “huge” amount of labor by ADOT (Adena Department of Transportation). Also, any effort directed at clearing an area around such a rock pillar would almost inevitably leave some archaeological traces such as are rarely found associated with rock pillars and have not been found associated with Beebe Rocks.

Conclusions

Efforts to interpret Ohio standing stones or rock pillars as prehistoric landmarks have met with indifferent success, even though meager archaeological remains have been found near enough to some as to suggest prehistoric activity associated with these natural features. Of the three most conspicuous pillars in Athens County, only the Coolville pillar appears to be associated with any kind of archaeological manifestation and none of the three are near or visible from known prehistoric trails.

References

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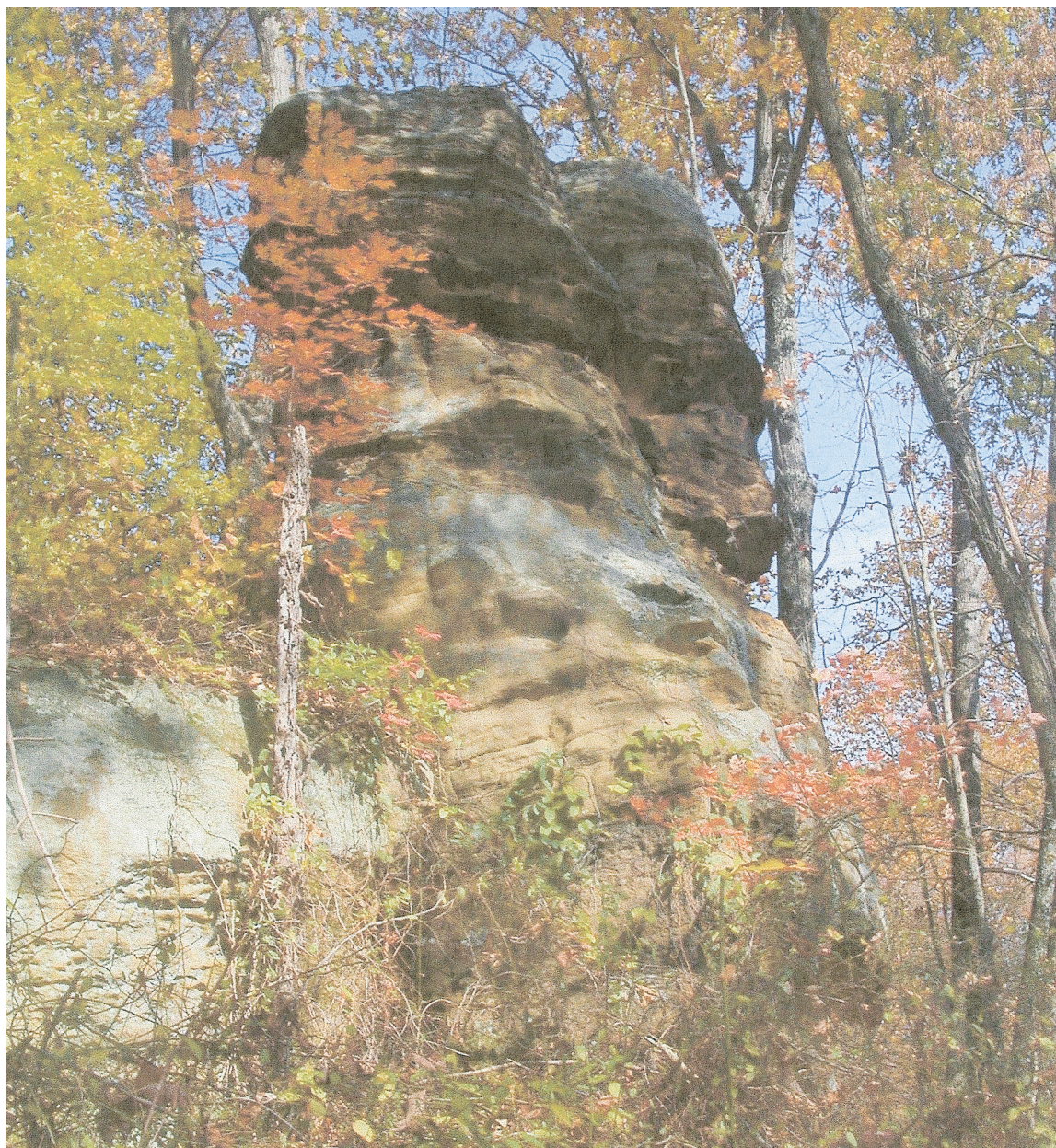


Figure 1 (Murphy) Coolville Stone Pillar, Looking North.



Figure 2 (Murphy) Coolville Stone Pillar, Looking West.



Figure 3 (Murphy) Cupstones in Rock Ledge immediately West of Coolville Pillar. "X"s placed above each pit.

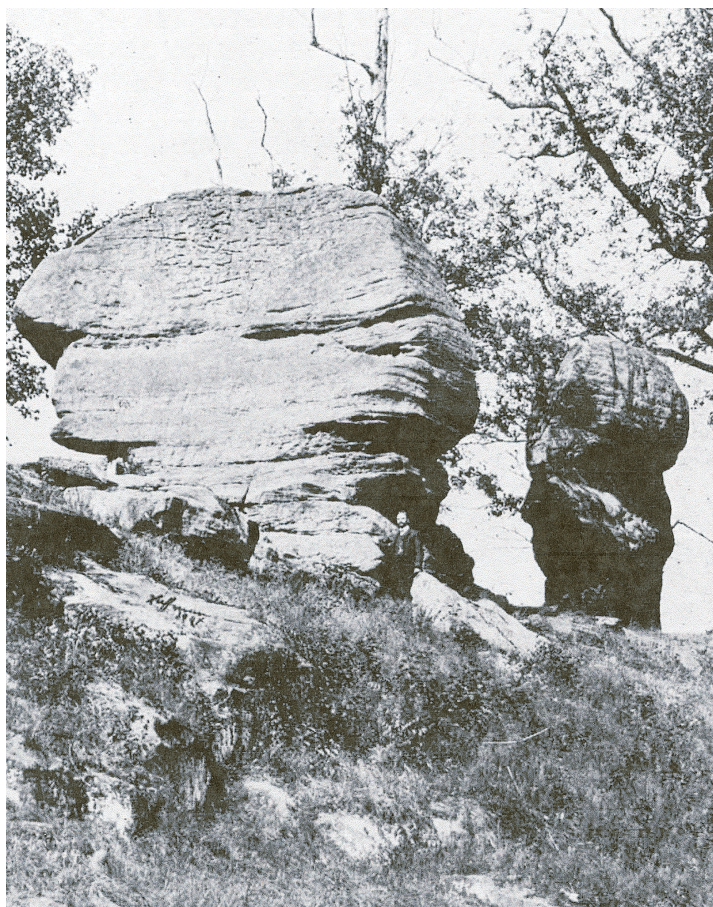


Figure 4 (Murphy) "Shadow Rock," Also known as Beebe Rocks (from Bush 1905)

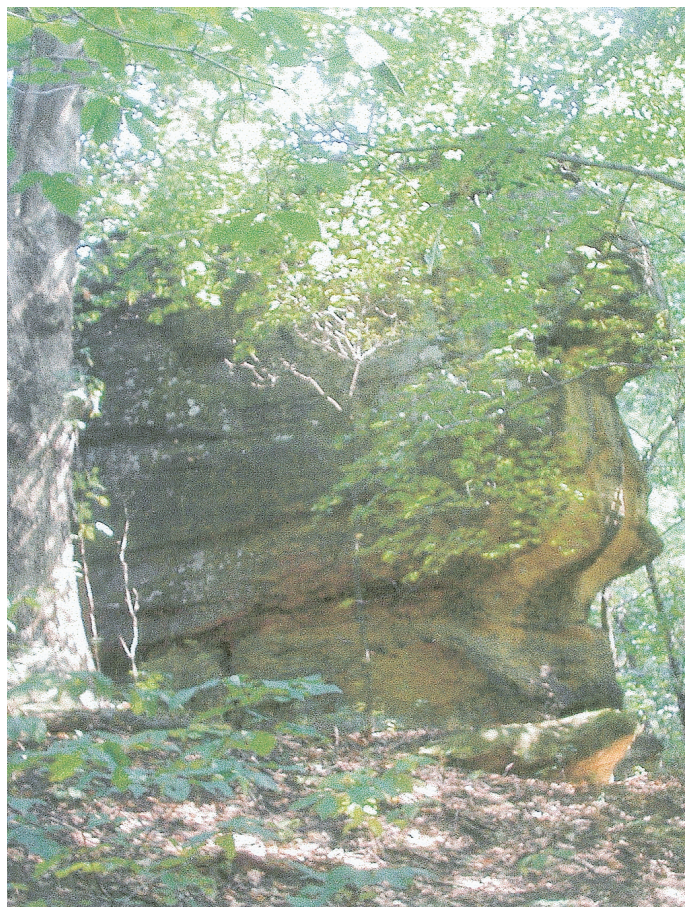


Figure 5 (Murphy) The larger of the two Beebe Rocks, with the Hocking River Valley in the background.